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ABSTRACT

Realizing that non-traditional students must cope with a campus that remains primarily oriented toward the 18-year-old just out of high school, the college teacher must make sure that both traditional and non-traditional students feel comfortable together in the classroom. College English teachers can help non-traditional students by letting them use what they already know, by letting various personal experiences--as a coal miner, nurse, mechanic, fire fighter, grandmother--be subjects of their writing. "Free-writing" in the first class session allows students to express thoughts and personal anxieties about coming to college. Throughout the semester, teachers should monitor students' writing attitudes, often through one-to-one discussion. Non-traditional students have had intriguing experiences, and their personal stories and anecdotes, along with their understanding of the world beyond college, should be made part of the English classroom. (A drawing by M. C. Escher used as a writing prompt and a writing attitude survey are included.) (RS)

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Grandmothers in the Classroom: How College English Teachers Can Help Those Non-traditional Students

Stephen Warren

Grandmothers are in the college classroom, along with 50-year-old factory workers, disenchanted business owners, veterans of the military, and retirees of all kinds. Each year, more and more of these adults return to higher education with the hope that learning something new will help them find the "right" jobs, will bolster self-esteem--will make them better people.

Non-traditional students, though, face more than an academic challenge: They must cope with a campus that primarily remains oriented toward the 18-year-old just out of high school, the teenager whose world-view and everyday concerns often differ drastically from their own. Realizing this, the college teacher assumes another responsibilty--to make sure that both traditional and non-traditional students feel comfortable together in the classroom.

The National Center for Education Statistics reported in 1991 that about 43 percent of all college students are at least 25 today, compared to 39 percent only a decade ago. This of course means that in any class--especially if it is a night course--many students will be older "non-traditionals." My own composition classes have included a former Army sergeant, a real estate agent, a social worker, a coal miner, a clergyman, a grandmother in her 60s.

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The first day of class is always a bit awkward, but especially so for non-traditionals, who find themselves in what is probably a new environment--or a place that has dramatically changed since they first attended years ago. I recently spoke with Roger Rousseau, Director of Off-Campus programs and advisor to many adult learners at Fairmont State College. "Non-traditional students," he said, "are conspicuous. And they know they are." Most of these students are very serious about their education, often managing full-time jobs while attending school part-time, usually as commuters. Because non-traditionals are so conscientious about their classes, though, traditional students sometimes regard them as "curve-busters," the "A's" and "B's" of the class, and potential resentment such as this widens the gap between the two. Simply put, older students feel out of place in the typical college classroom.

These students feel more at ease, I think, when they are allowed to express their thoughts about returning to college. At the first class session, I ask that all students do a ten-minute "free-write." This ungraded response, written in class, provides me with a sample of each student's writing and at the same time gives students a chance to write in a non-threatening atmosphere. So that they don't have to fish for a topic--often, a stressful chore for any student--I suggest a "prompt": in this case, "coming to college."

Perhaps the most profoundly revealing of these free-writes was submitted by a Navy officer in his 40s:

> I see myself as having problems, which I didn't expect, after returning to college after being out for twenty years. I did feel out of place because of my age differents [sic]. Training myself to study was also very hard for me. The first time I entered college I didn't worry about passing or failing like I do at the present. Also I have other responsibilities, such as children and a house to be taken care of, which I didn't have in the past.

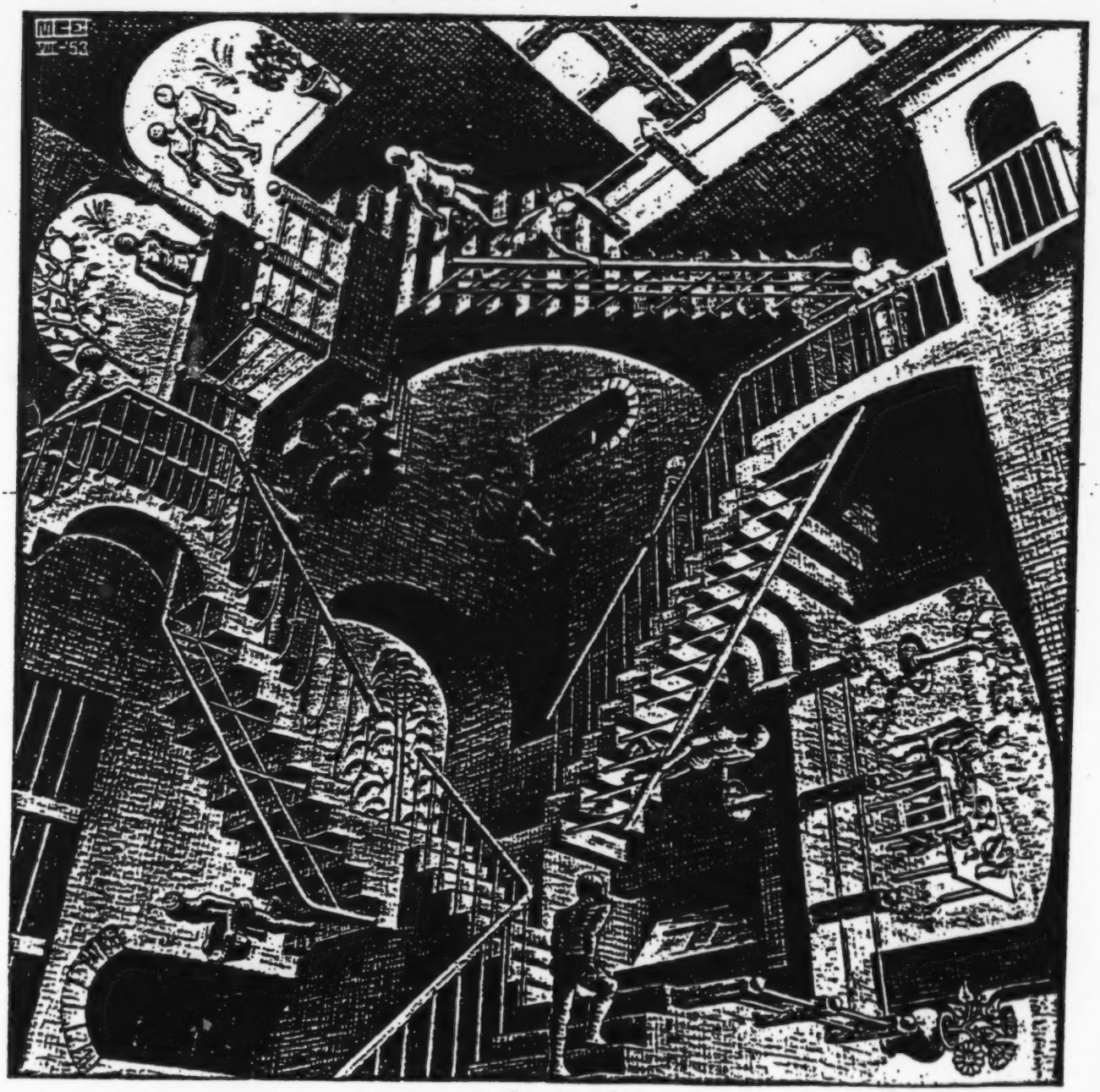
With anxieties about returning to college, with "adult" responsibilities, how can non-traditional students see any purpose in an English class? Introductory composition, a required course, doesn't seem relevant to their more career-oriented classes. More and more women, for instance, are trying to earn degrees in health services, yet composition and literature classes loom as obstacles. Ten, twenty, thirty years after that last high school class, they have forgotten rules of grammar and punctuation or, working to pay bills, have not had time to read a paperback novel, let alone Beowulf. Frustrated, these non-traditional students need to know that there is some purpose in taking a required English class. The question for the teacher, then, is "How can this class be relevant to their own lives and personal goals?"

There isn't a straight answer. But I think that a college English teacher can help non-traditional students by letting them use what they already know, by letting various personal experiences--as a coal miner, nurse, mechanic, fire fighter, grandmother--be subjects of their writing. In my own classes, several members of the military have written narratives about their ordeals. A retired sailor described, for instance, the horrifying night when rough waves nearly swept him off the deck of his ship. Another wrote about the trials of Army training; most recently, a veteran of the Persian Gulf War movingly expressed his feelings on having to kill an Iraqi soldier.

Again, "free-writing" allows students to express thoughts and perhaps personal anxieties about coming to college. I have received some especially interesting resposes to a drawing by M. C. Escher; this optical illusion, aptly called "Relativity," depicts staircases which lead up or down, depending entirely on point of view. Wrote one student:

> In life it often seems you are climbing a ladder or a stairway. However, each time you think you reach the top, you find that there is someone higher and yet another flight of steps. Occasionally, things in life cause you to take a few steps down, or descend. You must then attempt to turn your life around and again ascend. [Wendy Whorton]

"Relativity" by M.C. Escher



Her response suggests, I think, the frustration of non-traditional students--a frustration which is consistently evident in their writing attitudes.

Generally, non-traditional students seem to dislike their own writing (perhaps because they feel insecure about punctuation and grammar skills), nor do they think that **others** will like their writing. In order to monitor students' opinions about composition--both at the beginning and end of the semester--I ask them to complete the "Daly Writing Attitudes Survey." This multi-item response sheet presents various statements about writing [For instance, "I avoid writing."], and students indicate whether they strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree.

An Army veteran, for instance, initially indicated that he strongly agreed with the statement "I avoid writing." By semester's end, however, he disagreed--not "strongly," but he did disagree. What's more, his improved confidence about writing accompanied a new belief that others enjoyed reading his work. [In small groups of 3-5, students occasionally read and talk about each other's compositions.]

While "success stories" such as this may be encouraging for a teacher, survey statistics must be cautiously interpreted. An attitude improvement, as suggested by this survey, might be misleading. A more positive statement, late in the course, could result from student expectations--because respondants felt that improvement was <u>expected</u>, not because they genuinely

felt more comfortable about writing. Throughout the semester, then, the teacher should monitor students' attitudes, often through one-to-one discussion.

Why did the Army veteran's attitudes improve? I think that, primarily, he felt more comfortable, more competent, in writing about what he knew best, Army life. More importantly, though, he realized that, in order to express his ideas (to classmates or anyone), he had to communicate them in such a way that others could read them; this meant following rules for punctuation and grammar. Classmates' appreciation of his writing reinforced not only his desire to write--to interest and entertain others--but also his self-confidence about writing.

Non- traditional students have had intriguing experiences, and their personal stories and anecdotes, along with their understanding of that world beyond college, should be made part of the English classroom. Both non-traditional and traditional students will benefit, 18-year-olds and grandmothers alike.

WRITING ATTITUDES

Directions: There are no right or wromg answers to the following statements. Please indicate the degree to which ach statement applies to you by circling the appropriatwe answer.

	STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE
1) I avoid writing.	1	2	3	4
2) I have no fear of my writing being evaluated	1	2	3	4.
3) I look forward to writing my ideas down.	1	2	3	4
4) I am afraid of writing paragraphs when I know that they will be eval ·ted	1	2	3	4
5) Taking a writing course is a very frightening experience.	1	2	3	4
Handing in a piece of writing makes me feel good.	1	2	3	4
My mind seems to go blank when I start to work on a paragraph.	1	2	3	4
8, Expressing ideas through writing seems to be a waste of time.	1	2	3	4
9) I would enjoy submitti my writing to a magazi: :or evaluation and publicat ı.	1	2	3	4
10) I would like to write down my ideas.	1	2	3	4
11) I feel confident in my ability to clearly express my ideas in writing.	1	2	3	4
12) I like to have my friends read what I have written.	1	2	3	4
13) I'm nervous about writing.	1	2	3	4

	STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE
14) People seem to enjoy what I write.	1	2	3	4
15) I enjoy writing.	1	2	3	4
16) I never seem to be able to clearly write down my ideas.	1	2	3	4
17) Writing is a lot of fun.	1	2	3	4
18) I expect to do poorly in a writing course even before I enter it.	1	2	3	4
19) I like seeing my thoughts on paper.	1	2	3	4
20) Discussing my writing with others is an enjoyable experience.	1	2	3	4
21) I have a terrible time organizing my ideas in a writing course.	1	2	3	4
22) When I hand in a piece of writing, I know I'm going to do poorly.	1	2	3	4
23) It's easy for me to write good paragraphs.	1	2	3	4
24) I don't think I write as well as most people.	1	2	3	4
25) I don't like my paragraphs to be evaluated.	1	2	3	4
26) I'm no good at writing.	1	2	3	4